PROPOSAL DEVELOPMENT GUIDE

Michigan Department of Education

Contact the Office of Budget, Contracts and Grants at (517) 373-1806 for further information.

FOREWORD

The Michigan State Board of Education awards grants annually to eligible applicants throughout the state. All grant funds for the Department of Education are appropriated by the State Legislature. Grants are then made available to eligible applicants in the state through formula, competitive and incentive grant processes. Because funding is often limited and the requirements of the grant programs are demanding, the Department seeks the best qualified applicants through a rigorous proposal review process. The Michigan Department of Education's Office of Budget Contract and Grants offers the following *Proposal Development Guide* for the purpose of stimulating more thorough and responsive grant applications to competitive grant programs.

The *Proposal Development Guide* is intended to serve as a supplement to specific information contained in grant application materials from the Michigan Department of Education for specific grant programs. In the *Guide*, information and recommendations are provided to assist potential applicants in (1) deciding whether to submit an application under a competitive grant program, and (2) developing a grant application. The *Guide* attempts to illustrate the simple, logical sequence of developing an idea and presenting it in a convincing manner. Both content and method of presentation are addressed.

The State Board of Education hopes that the *Proposal Development Guide* will promote better understanding of the kind of information expected in a well-developed grant application. The perspectives of persons experienced with both the proposal writing and proposal reviewing processes are reflected in the material. Grateful acknowledgment is made to the contribution of both materials and ideas by the experienced grants staff of the Wayne County Intermediate School District. Considerable inspiration was also drawn from ?Program Planning & Proposal Writing" and ?Proposal Checklist and Evaluation Form," published by the Grantsmanship Center, Los Angeles, California.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Competitive Grants

What is the Michigan Department of Education REALLY looking for in your grant proposal to a competitive grant program?

The Department looks for:
- The best ideas and cost effective means for accomplishing specific purposes of the competitive grant program.
- Fresh ideas and creative ways of addressing the stated educational needs.
- Proposals that hold promise for making a difference for students.
- Proposals that are targeted to results.
- Proposals that have statewide implications and potential for working in other areas of the state and in districts having the same needs.

Competitive grant programs, in general, are made available to initiate new approaches that will significantly improve the quality of education and support the development and implementation of concepts that will make a difference. Competitive grant funds area intended to supplement district expenditures on educational costs. The funds are not intended to carry out basic program improvements, for which many of the formula grant programs are designated.

Technically, your application is reviewed and rated according to how well the content of the proposal answers the following questions and compares with other applications:
- What is the need? (Do you understand the problem?)
- What is the proposed solution to the need? (Will your solution work and is it a good one?)
- Who will carry out the solution? (Do you have the staff to make it work?)
- How will the project be measured for effectiveness? (How will you know if you have succeeded?)
- Do you have the commitment and the capacity to do the job? (Is this an appropriate activity for your agency now and in the near future?)
- How much will this cost? (Will the benefits be worth the costs?)

B. Deciding Whether to Apply

Before you begin to develop a proposal for any grant program, you and your agency should review the options and consider the factors which may affect your qualifications as an applicant. The checklist provided in Appendix 1 raises a variety of points to consider before making a decision to apply for a grant.

II. THE PLANNING PROCESS

A. Importance of Planning

Once your agency has made a decision to apply for a grant, planning can begin. Thorough planning usually results in a more clearly focused and better written proposal. Planning will enable you to develop a proposal that is comprehensive and more likely to be funded. Experienced proposal writers emphasize the importance of planning in any proposal development effort.

3. Analyze needs to determine which objectives are unmet.
4. Analyze your agency's current plan for achieving the identified goals and objectives. This encompasses programs, methods, available human and material resources, and activities.
5. Plan your new approach based on the best combinations of these activities.

B. Analyzing the Grant Program

Careful analysis of the grant program will enable you to focus on the purpose of the grant and how it will meet your needs. Become familiar with the information contained in the grant application packet:

Following a planning process helps to give credibility to a proposal. In addition, the proposal development process becomes easier in that it evolves from the planning process. The planning process includes the following activities:

1. Identify and gain consensus on the broad goals of your educational endeavor.
2. Define objectives and describe what must be accomplished in order to achieve the goals.

- Review the available grant categories, and determine the grant category under which your agency wishes to compete.
- Digest carefully the guidelines for each category of interest. Here you will find all the preliminary information on which to build the various components of your proposal.
- Pay particular attention to the kind of information requested in each component of the application. All must be included in your finished proposal.
- Note such things as how many copies of the proposal you need, where they are to be sent, or where they can be hand delivered.
- Note the date on which the application is due.

III. THE PROPOSAL DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

The standard proposal development process follows the same set of steps regardless of whether the funding source is the Federal Government, State Government, foundations or corporations. However, the steps may be taken in a somewhat different order.

A. Survey Needs

In developing a needs survey, refer to the guidelines in the application materials for the category. Look for information on the kinds of educational problems or needs which the Department wishes to address through the grant program. The needs may be identified as priorities for planning, training, product development, or demonstration. Priorities are needs that have been identified by various staff members, committees, or task forces. They may be actual needs in many parts of the state, but not in the area served by your agency. They may be needs which your agency has long considered very important.

Whatever the situation, a solid case must be built to identify, verify and document your actual needs situation. What is developed through the needs survey will provide the information necessary to complete the needs section of the finished proposal.

Before beginning the needs survey or needs assessment, it may be helpful to answer the following questions:
• What data are needed?
• Who will be assessed?
• Who will do the assessing?
• When are the data needed?
• How should the data be collected?

The needs assessment is followed by an analysis of the data, the priority of identified needs, and a plan developed using the data in the grant application.

B. Develop Idea

After analyzing and interpreting data from your needs assessment, the next step is to consider the various options, available resources, objectives to be accomplished, and the variety of activities best suited to meeting these objectives.

A brainstorming session is one successful method for developing ideas to address the identified needs. Brainstorming is a means for generating a great number of ideas in a short period of time. The process encourages people to be creative and allows them to generate more ideas as they are stimulated by the ideas of others. Be sure to invite both creative thinkers and realists to the session. The creative thinkers may suggest unusual solutions you would not have considered while the realists can modify these solutions to make them more practical and workable. Three to five persons constitute the optimal brainstorming team.

Rules for Brainstorming
1. Say anything relevant that comes to mind.
2. Criticism of statements is not permitted.
3. Discussion is permitted.
4. Repetition is okay.
5. Piggy-backing on someone else's idea is okay.
6. When you think you are finished, keep going.

Once a brainstorming session is complete, take time to process the ideas. Very often you will find that, from a group of thirty responses, the ideas will fall into clusters of five to seven responses each. The clusters can be used to determine priorities, or the individual ideas may be rank ordered according to what seems most useful and feasible. The results of both approaches can then form the basis for further proposal development.

C. Identify Funding Sources

The Department's competitive grant programs are a potential source of funds for any of the projects described in the application materials. However, if you wish to propose a related project which doesn't exactly fit the stated purpose of the funding, that particular grant program may not be a potential funding source for your project. Successful applicants will most likely be those who do not deviate from the specified grant purposes.

To receive maximum consideration for a grant award under some competitive grant programs, you may be expected to show in-kind or cash contributions as part of the total project budget. These contributions may come from local funds, existing programs, or possibly philanthropic foundations, and corporate-giving programs. Possible sources of support to continue or expand your project after the grant ends should also be considered.

D. Review Literature and Existing Programs

Before fully developing and finalizing your project idea, it is best to learn as much as you can about what has been tried by others in addressing your identified needs. By reviewing published material and examining existing projects related to your needs, you will find out if your idea is new or if another approach might be more appropriate. This information can be used to strengthen your proposed project and provide more substantial rationale for why your project should be funded. Taking the time and effort to research your idea demonstrates your interest, knowledge, and experience with trying to resolve the needs you have identified.

The various sources of information and research on activities related to your identified needs might include:
— *Publications*, such as journal articles, books, technical or research reports, conference proceedings, congressional documents, dissertations and reviews.

— *National Diffusion Network*, which lists educational programs found to be effective in solving educational problems.
— *Clearinghouses and Computer Data Bases*, such as **ERIC**, which can provide information on both literature and programs.
— *Other Sources*, such as specialized lists of businesses, business products, economic events, grants and foundations.

E. Develop Proposal Coordination Plan

In many cases where you will be responding to the announcement of a grant program, there will be approximately four to six weeks in which to develop a proposal. During this time you must learn about the grant program, consult with appropriate persons about the merits of the grant program, and decide whether to become an applicant. These steps can consume quite a bit of your time. Therefore, it is recommended that you have a plan for coordinating the development of the proposal.

A Proposal Coordination Plan lays out all the steps and products necessary for the development and submission of the grant application. It designates the individual(s) responsible for each component of the process and includes a projected due date for the completion of each component. The Proposal Coordination Plan is your management plan for developing and submitting a grant application by the filing deadline. A sample Proposal Coordination Plan is provided in Appendix 2.

F. Identify Writing Team

Unless you are fortunate to have content specialists who are also good writers and have the time to write a proposal, you will most likely need to use a team of people to develop the proposal. The team should consist of a proposal coordinator, content specialists, and writers. They may be drawn from the brainstorming group who developed the original idea or from among

those who reviewed the existing literature. Sections of the proposal could be assigned to different individuals with the coordinator serving as the editor who develops consistency and uniformity in the final product. One person might serve as the writer with others functioning as a review team. The following characteristics are recommended for the proposal coordinator: (1) knowledgeable about grant writing, (2) good management skills, (3) may or may not write but can serve as editor, (4) may or may not have content expertise, and (5) pays attention to detail.

G. Write Proposal

Although the actual content of the proposal will be discussed in Section IV of the *Proposal Development Guide*, there are a few observations which could be made about proposal writing in general:

1. Always write to the specifications of the grant program. Other items that are considered important may be added after you have addressed all the requested points.
2. Following the narrative format recommended in the grant application instructions.
3. KISS - Keep It Short and Simple. To do this, you should:
   - Use plain English.
   - Be direct.
   - Explain all acronyms and abbreviations.
   - Define unfamiliar terminology.
   - Try to limit each sentence to fifteen words or less.
   - Keep paragraphs short and limit them to one major idea per paragraph.
4. Although brevity is preferred, clarity is a must. Provide enough specific information to answer the questions of what, why, who, when, where, and how.
5. Support general conclusions with adequate statistics, documentation, and rationale to make those conclusions convincing.
6. Develop all components of your proposal so that they are clearly connected with logical flow from the need to the proposed solutions to the evaluation to the budget request.

7. Give yourself enough lead time so that you will have adequate time to give it a final review and touch up.
8. The proposal should be neat and easy to read. Don't use fancy proposal packaging and expensive binders as they will be removed and discarded.

H. Review Proposal

After a proposal has been written, it should be given a series of internal reviews before it is submitted to the Department. This will allow for any necessary revisions which could make the proposal more accurate, understandable, or convincing. One key internal review step involves a review of the proposal by persons other than the writers and, preferably, by persons totally unfamiliar with the project. These persons should include non-educators, if possible, for they could best indicate if any unsupported assumptions or technical terms are preventing clear communication. A final review by your business office is also highly recommended to catch such errors as incorrect calculations, omitted cost factors, and other budgetary errors or inconsistencies. After gaining the required administrative approval, your application is ready to be submitted.

I. Solicit Comments

Whether funding is approved or not, you should seek the reviewers' comments on your proposal. If you have been successful, it is useful to know what the readers liked about your proposal and any weaknesses they might have discerned. If your proposal has been rejected, it is helpful to know its flaws to avoid similar errors in the future.

J.   Redesign and Recycle

The final step in the grant development process suggests that you determine your next funding strategy. You have an option in subsequent funding cycles of rejecting an unfunded project, redesigning it, or developing a totally new project for submission to the same or another funding source. You also have an option of keeping your project idea and pursuing funding from other state, federal, foundation, corporate, or local funding sources.

In summary, agencies that have given the necessary time and effort to program planning and the proposal development process will derive many benefits besides the funds awarded. The benefits include:

- Enhanced credibility and programmatic knowledge because of a thorough needs assessment and literature review.
- Clearer goals based on actual needs.
- Improved management because of activity and assignment of staff responsibilities.
- Development of measurable objectives.
- Improved program evaluation.
- More efficient financial management because of financial planning.

IV. DEVELOPING THE PROPOSAL COMPONENTS

Included in this section are recommendations for information to include in your proposal, as well as hints for writing a successful proposal. The standard components of a grant proposal are:

- **Proposal Abstract** - clearly and succinctly summarizes the grant request.
- **Need -** describes and documents the needs to be met, or the problem to be resolved, by the proposed project.
- **Plan of Operation -** describes the proposed project and how it will be implemented and managed.
- **Quality of Key Personnel -** describes the qualifications and responsibilities of the project director and other staff.
- **Evaluation** - describes a plan for determining the degree to which the desired results are achieved.
- **Applicant's Commitment and Capacity** - describes past success with similar projects, available facilities and equipment.
- **Budget and Cost-Effectiveness** - describes projected costs, in-kind and cash contributions, and benefits in terms of costs.

A. Project Abstract

The abstract is a brief, one-page summary of the proposed project. Because it is brief, however, does not mean that it is unimportant. The abstract frames your proposal and puts what follows into context. The abstract will be the reviewer's first impression of your proposal. It should be written and polished very carefully.

Do
1. Write the abstract last.
2. Be succinct, brief and interesting.
3. Identify the target group that will be served by the project.

4. Describe the reason for the grant request: the issue, problem or need.
5. Describe your proposed solution, the objectives to be achieved, and the kinds of activities to be conducted to accomplish the objectives.
6. Describe the products and anticipated results of your proposed project.
7. Describe the importance of the project and include the total cost, funds committed and amount requested.
8. Keep the abstract to one page.

Don't
1. Treat the abstract as unimportant.
2. Be wordy.

B. Need

The need or problem statement represents the reason for your project and provides the rationale for what you are proposing to do. The needs generally focus on the conditions in the lives of the target group that you would like to change. The needs and the proposed solution should be linked to the goals of your agency.

Do
1. Describe the needs in your own words.
2. State the needs in terms of the project participants.
3. Describe the method used to determine that the need exists.
4. Support the needs statement with statistical data and statements from authoritative sources.
5. Describe any previous attempts by your agency to address the needs.
6. Build a legitimate, logical case for your grant request.

Don't

1. Describe national or statewide needs without showing they are also your agency's needs.
2. Attempt to resolve needs of unreasonable dimension.
3. Make unsupported assumptions.
4. Be vague.

C. Plan of Operation

The plan of operation is the heart of your proposal. It contains your proposed solution to the needs, the project design, and describes what action you are planning to take to achieve the desired results. The overall project design, goals of the project, project objectives, activities to meet objectives, and a plan for managing the project are included in the plan of operation.

1. **Project design** - The project design paints a broad picture of your project and what you expect to accomplish. It contains solutions to identified needs or problems you are attempting to resolve. Care must be taken in writing the project design so that it is clear and logical.

2. **Goals** - A project can have many goals, depending upon the scope and magnitude of your needs. Goals are broad, general statements which should come out of the needs assessment. They are the long-range benefits that you hope to attain.

3. **Objectives** - Each identified need should be accompanied by an objective. Objectives are specific and measurable statements which tell who, what and when. They should be written in behavioral terms that are quantifiable. Objectives are generally divided into two categories -- product and process objectives. Product objectives relate to outcomes. Process objectives relate to outcomes. Process objectives identify milestones to be accomplished over the course of the project.

These milestones are useful in monitoring the implementation of your planned program. Objectives should be developed with the assistance of a project evaluator to be certain they are attainable.

In writing objectives:
- Describe the anticipated outcomes of your project in relation to the identified need or problem.
- Define the population to be served.
- State the time when the objectives will be met.
- State the outcome in numerical, measurable terms.
- Include the level of performance expected for success.

4. **Activities or methods** - When needs and problems have been described and the objectives stated, the next part of your plan of operation will spell out the activities or methods through which you expect to accomplish the objectives. In describing the project activities, provide a rationale for why the activities were chosen and indicate their sequence. The scope of activities should be such that they may be completed successfully within the time period of the grant and within the resources of your agency.

5. **Management Plan** - The intent of the management plan is to identify responsibilities of project staff and the timetable of proposed activities. The management plan shows how the project will come together. A Pert Chart or Gantt Chart is frequently used for this purposes. The management plan should describe your staffing pattern, proposed staff and contracted consultants. A project director should be identified.

D. Quality of Key Personnel

Since many of the projects to be funded under the Department's competitive grant programs call for a considerable amount of technical expertise, close attention will be paid to the capabilities of the personnel conducting your project. In order to emphasize staff qualifications, provide a narrative description of the relevant experiences, education, and training of the project director, other professional staff and any consultants with whom you propose to contract. You should demonstrate that they have the skills and qualifications necessary for the proposed activities.

Reviewers are critical of proposals that request funding for unnecessary staff, especially administrative staff, and for expensive out-of-state consultants when equally qualified persons are available within Michigan. Reviewers also question what appear to be efforts by an applicant to find a way to pay someone's salary. In some cases, using competitive grant funds for salaries of project staff may be appropriate. This practice is not encouraged because it commits the grantee to recurring expenses after the project funding ends.

Do
1. Describe the experiences, education and training of project staff as they relate to proposed responsibilities.
2. Summarize resumes in the narrative and include full resumes in the appendix of your application.
3. Indicate the amount of time staff will devote to the project.

Don't
1. Propose full-time staff for responsibilities that appear less than full-time.
2. Propose to use grant funds for salaries, without considering the recurring expenses that occur after the grant ends.

E. Evaluation Plan

Evaluation is a necessary means for determining results. A comprehensive evaluation plan enables the Department to determine how committed the potential grantee is to achieving the desired results, and what the grant funds actually will buy. If possible, your evaluative design should be developed with assistance of a project evaluator to be certain that it properly assesses project achievements. Your evaluation design should allow you to examine both the process and the products of project implementation. The framework for this design is based on two essential components: Process (formative) evaluation and Product (summative) evaluation.

Do
1. Identify who will do the evaluation and how that person was selected.
2. Set your criterion levels for success.
3. Include an evaluation procedure to assess each objective.
4. Describe your data gathering methods and time lines.
5. Describe your test instruments or questionnaires.
6. Describe how you will analyze the data.
7. Explain how evaluation results will be used to modify the project both during the grant period and afterwards.
8. Describe any evaluation reports to be produced.
9. Obtain the assistance of an evaluator, if possible, in developing the project's evaluation design.

Don't
1. State that an evaluation plan will be developed after a grant is received.
2. Propose an evaluation plan that doesn't relate to your objectives.
3. Merely state that an expert will be hired to take care of the evaluation.

F. Applicant's Commitment and Capacity

Applicants are often expected to show the importance of the project to them by making in-kind of cash contributions to the project. In-kind contributions may include such things as equipment, facilities, secretarial or administrative support, or staff time. Grant recipients may be expected to continue at least some aspect of the project after grant funding ends. Provide examples of your previous experiences with similar projects and any special expertise or equipment that can be used in support of the grant. The application materials may contain a section labeled ?Additional Requirements" for various grant categories within a competitive grant program. Here you will find specified the kinds of commitment and capabilities the Department is looking for in the successful grant applicant. Respond to all points with specific, concrete, and detailed information. Note where consortium applicants may be favored.

Do

1. Be specific.
2. Provide Concrete, detailed examples.
3. Respond to all relevant additional requirements for the grant category you have chosen.

Don't

1. Assume that the reviewers know all about your agency.

G. Budget and Cost-Effectiveness

The thought that you give to budget preparation will not only contribute to a better planned program but also enhance your chance of being awarded a grant. Although a grant award might still be recommended with budget modifications, a reasonable, well-delineated budget will be rated higher by proposal reviewers. The budget section of your proposal should be as specific and detailed as the narrative portion of your application. It should reflect the cost of activities outlined in your plan of operation, and contain no surprises or unjustified purchases. If an item is in your budget, it must have a direct link to the project design, or, at a minimum, justify the cost. In all cases, present budget based on sound rationale and justification.

Do

1. Let the budget reflect exactly what you propose in the narrative.
2. Provide all details, such as: salary rate, percentage of time for salary, fringe benefits, mileage rates for travel, per diem rates, honorarium rates, etc.
3. Include all items for which funding is requested.
4. Include all items paid by other sources (such as in-kind contributions).
5. Be able to justify all requests.
6. Describe benefits to the target group in terms of the estimated costs.

Don't

1. Introduce any unexplained or unexpected items in the budget.
2. Request unexplained amounts, such as ?miscellaneous" or ?contingency fund."
3. Inflate the budget by requesting more than you need.
4. Request major equipment purchases that aren't justified by the project.

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The key to receiving a grant is good planning and communication. If you follow the steps in this *Guide*, you will be on your way to planning better programs and writing better proposals.